

Anderson, Jeff. *Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer's Workshop*. Portland: Stenhouse, 2005. Print. Excerpt Ch. 3

Handling the Notebooks

- *Do they go home?* I choose to leave the notebooks in the classroom, but if for any reason a notebook is missing, I allow the student to do the work and then glue it in the proper place in the writer's notebook later.
- *Storage?* To keep each class's notebooks organized, I have colored crates, labeled for each class. Some years I have had shelf space and then I use that.
- *What if they mess up?* If a big mistake happens in the notebook and it must be corrected or covered, glue a sheet, cut to fit, over the mistake. "Everything is fixable, except tearing out pages!"

Models of Keeping Notebooks

Berne, Suzanne. *A Crime in the Neighborhood*.
 Byrd, Robert. *Leonardo: Beautiful Dreamer*.
 Haddix, Margaret Peterson. *Don't You Dare Read This, Mrs. Dunphrey*.
 Moss, Marissa. *Max's Logbook*.
 Moss, Marissa. *Amelia's Notebook*.
 Moss, Marissa. *My Notebook (with Help from Amelia)*.
 Schotter, Roni. *Nothing Ever Happens on 90th Street*.

Resources for Writer's Notebooks

Buckner, Aimee. *Notebook Know-How*.
 Bomer, Randy. *Time for Meaning*.
 Fletcher, Ralph. *A Writer's Notebook*.
 Fletcher, Ralph. *Breathing In, Breathing Out: Keeping a Writer's Notebook*.
 Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones*.

Okay, about now, you're probably saying, "Wait a minute, what about the grammar and mechanics in the writer's notebook? With all this free movement, weaving, discovery, context, collections, and dancing around in the messiness of real writing, how do I systematize what I'm teaching? Where do I hold all this freewheeling knowledge, and how on earth can I ground this knowledge long enough to be etched in my students' individual repertoires?" All I have done so far is discuss how to construct the playground. The editor's checklist is my tool for helping students become systematic in integrating mechanics growth into their writing.

Starting an Editor's Checklist

← *Begin Reading*

Because I want to be a responsive teacher, responding to my students' grammatical and mechanical needs as they arise, I have to strike a balance between what students may need at any given time and the overall blueprint of what my kids should know and be able to do when they walk out of my class at

the end of the year. The editor's checklist is an essential tool for meeting this goal in my classroom. This one tool can serve as a blueprint for the year, a placeholder, a record of your grammar and mechanics teaching.

I don't mean the editor's checklist found at the teacher supply store, or the lengthy list that comes with textbooks, or even the individual list that your students *don't* keep in their writing folders.

I bow down to worship any teacher who can get all of his or her students to keep their own personalized lists of idiosyncratic errors, but *I* could only keep up with these individualized checklists with my 150 students for about three weeks into the semester. I stress the word *I* because if I did not sit with individual students and tell them what they needed to work on, the lists were never made or added to or even referred to. It's just like when I corrected errors on their papers. I would hope that if I sit next to them, working one-on-one, they would learn new writing skills by my modeling.

Researchers tell us to teach skills in context. They tell us to conference for one-on-one instruction, but I had thirty other students who were clamoring for me to assist them as well. I wonder, do math teachers teach most skills one-on-one? These attempts at teaching mechanics didn't work because I never got to every kid. And I just deepened their dependence on some "other" authority instead of scaffolding them to tackle and reason with grammar and mechanics on their own.

Finally, I began keeping an organic editor's checklist: a system that grows from student writing and what research says kids have to know. In my class, we constantly move back and forth between the editor's checklist and writer's notebook.

On the first day of school, I hang a long piece of white butcher paper on the wall, in a spot everyone can see. If kids ask about it, I tell them this sheet is going to help them grow up and be ready for high school. If no one says anything, I say, "So when are y'all going to leave me alone about the white butcher paper?" I get puzzled looks. I love to puzzle my kids. I tell them their brains are growing.

On the second day, before school, I write across the top in big green letters *Editor's Checklist*.

"I think you are now ready for me to share with you," I say, pointing at the butcher paper, "the editor's checklist."

Audible groan. Just the word *editing* sends shivers down students' spines. Who can blame them? Especially when they are assuming it is probably just one more way to make writing like filling out a worksheet. Their adolescent brains downshift: One more way to be wrong; one more rule that doesn't make sense and doesn't apply to me; one more thing I couldn't care less about; one more thing to check off, be done with, so I can sit, talk, and write notes. When I have given my students a photocopied checklist in the past, that is, in fact, what they have done. They have checked off each box, one at

a time. Checklists mostly get us checks, not editing, but this organic editor's checklist is different.

"Have you ever seen an editor's checklist?" Most students say no, even though they probably have seen one in one form or another. "This chart is going to help us learn many of the important things to be adult writers. Writers' secrets, if you will." A good percentage of my middle school students want to be adults, so I shamelessly use this desire to manipulate them into caring about mechanics. "You're not a child anymore," I say, "but you're not an adult either. You're in between. One of the ways we make our writing more adult is to use punctuation marks correctly." I get a few smirks, but I have everyone's attention.

"Have you ever thought about why we have punctuation? Or better yet, why we have laws and rules everywhere we go?"

"So we won't get in trouble," offers Stephanie.

"Tell me more, Stephanie."

"Well, it's like we can't go through stop signs because there would be a crash."

"What other rules keep you safe?"

Albert's hand shoots up. "The pool over at San Pedro Park; there are these signs that say 'No Running.'"

"At Pecan Grove Apartments it says the same thing," adds Ramiro.

"Can anyone think of a pool where they want you to run?" I ask.

Silence envelops the room as they search their brains.

"I guess that rule is pretty standard." We talk about the conventions of eating at the table, restaurants, driving. After we have exhausted all the possible places where rules serve us, I ask, "Whom do you think invented conventions or rules for writing?"

"Teachers?" wonders Jeremy.

"Maybe there was this mean English teacher a long time ago who had a red pen for a hand," I say, holding my right arm stiff in front of me, thrashing it around in crossing-out motions. "And she just started marking up papers for fun, slashing them to bits."

"Whatever!" Sara says.

"No, it wasn't a mean old teacher with a red-pen hand. It was the writers. They wanted to be understood. Don't you want to be understood too? Grammar and mechanics are conventions. The word *convention* meant *agreement* in its original Latin form. You told me we had agreements or rules about eating, being at a pool, and so on. You said they told us how to act. Well, writers wanted people to understand what they said, even when they weren't around. They wanted people to understand their words so they started agreeing on things: A period means stop this thought; a capital letter signals that a new sentence is beginning or that a word is a name."

This discussion begins building the concept. Referring to the editor's checklist, I explain how we will learn more about how to follow the rules and

how following conventions of mechanics and grammar makes our writing easier to understand. And what middle school students want is to be understood—finally.

“Are you tired of nobody hearing you? Writing gives you that power, and part of writing’s power is in its passion, its details, but all of that is lost if the grammar and mechanics can’t hold the message together.”

Soon after, I read *Punctuation Takes a Vacation*. This whimsical picture book by Robin Pulver (2003) describes the plight of a class whose punctuation gets so sick and tired of being erased, left out, and moved around that all the punctuation marks rebel and go on vacation. The story and illustrations describe how much punctuation is missed. The book is one more way to stress the value of punctuation as a tool writers harness to communicate.

Where Do I Begin My Editor’s Checklist?

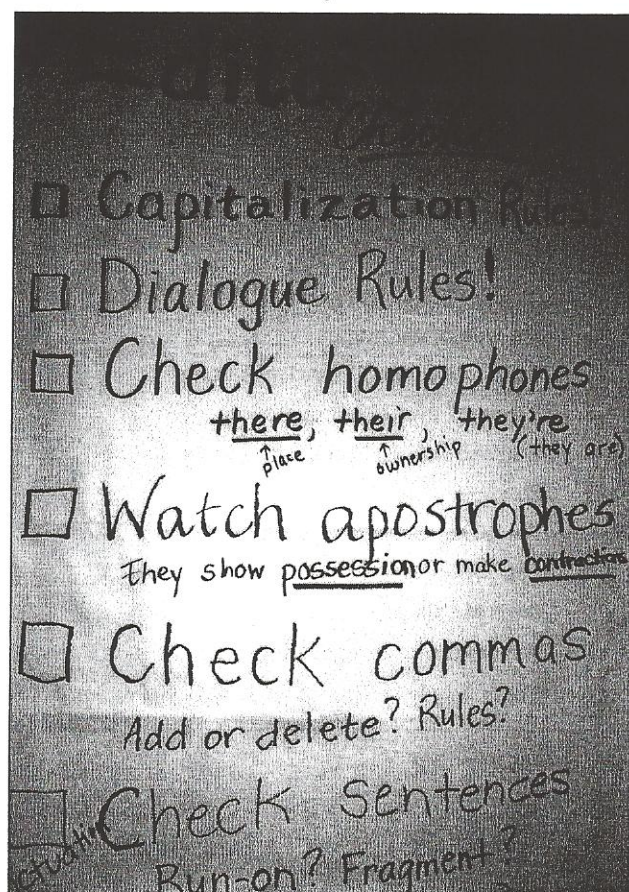
In truth, the editor’s checklist may only be semiorganic. While it grows from the hubris of student writing, it also incorporates my state standards along with Connors and Lunsford’s top twenty errors, listed in Chapter 1.

After I teach grammar and mechanics concepts through snippets of text or writers’ secrets, students help me list each rule on the editor’s checklist (see Figure 3.7). If appropriate, we add an annotation that reminds them of how to apply the rule and its purpose. It may be more appropriate to refer to another list posted in the room or to start a different wall chart. Figure 3.8 offers advice about which rules could go on the editor’s checklist and which could be posted separately. I find that posting capitalization rules and sentence patterns by themselves has several advantages. Separate lists serve as categorical organization for the high-priority rules and ensure that there is room left on the editor’s checklist for other important rules.

The First Entry

At the beginning of the year, students complete form after form and label after label. One of the most useful rules to introduce at the beginning of the year is capitalization. I lit on capitalization to start my editor’s checklist because (1) its use is immediate,

Figure 3.7 Editor’s Checklist Wall Chart



What Could Go on the Editor's Checklist?

What Could Go on the List?

Check capitalization
Check homophones
Check commas
Check pronouns
Check apostrophes
Check subject-verb agreement
Check double negatives
Check dialogue

What Could Get Its Own List?

Capitalization
Word wall of homophones and frequently misspelled words
Compound sentence patterns
Complex sentence patterns
Serial comma patterns
Pronouns
Two-word sentences
Verb tense
Dialogue rules

Figure 3.8 What Could Go on the Editor's Checklist?

Capitalization Rules!

1. Proper nouns
(**R**ayburn **M**iddle **S**chool, **S**an **A**ntonio, **B**rittany)
2. Proper Adjectives
(**E**nglish muffin, **S**ony television, **C**hinese food)
3. Title with a last name
(**C**oach **A**nderson, **P**resident **L**incoln)
4. First word in a direct quotation
(**V**anessa asked, "**W**hat can I write about?")
5. Titles
(**T**he **G**iver, **S**eventeen, **K**ing of the **H**ill)
6. Letter opening
(**D**ear **M**r. **C**hips,)
7. First word of a letter closing
(**Y**ours truly,)

Figure 3.9 Capitalization Rules!

and (2) the rules of capitalization are black and white and straightforward. Why start with something riddled with exceptions?

This way I can lull kids into believing that this grammar thing isn't so far out of reach.

I introduce the seven capitalization rules over several days by having students look at and create examples in the context of sentences, check their own work as well as others', and create a mini-rule book to keep in their writing folders. I then post the capitalization rules (see Figure 3.9).

Once the rules are understood, we are ready to be held accountable for capitalization. I walk over to the editor's checklist. "It's time for our first entry on our growing list of things to edit in our writing. From now on, every time you finish a piece of writing, instead of saying, 'I'm finished,' I want you to look at this list and reread your work, correcting it for capitalization." I write *Check capitalization* beneath the header *Editor's Checklist*. For other rules, we might make an annotation at the bottom of the list with key ideas to help spark our memories, but our high-priority capitalization rules have a separate poster. I remind kids that if they need more information, they can look at the capitalization poster.

Once we have zoomed in on a rule, how do we zoom back out? We go from looking at sentences to looking at paragraphs of our own writing and that of our peers. This needs to be a quick process, one that's easy and can be repeated with many mechanics concepts—if we're ever going to get those concepts in front of them enough, if we're ever going to get them to care and to know what to care about.

Express-Lane Edits: Returning to Context

One thing all my students are familiar with is the express lane at the grocery store. Sometimes you don't have time to shop for everything. If you only need to get a carton of milk, you can go through the express lane and save time

and hassle. I try to take this familiar part of our weekly routines and merge it into editing tasks.

How often do we get bogged down in the totality of all that needs fixing so that editing becomes an ordeal for students as well as the teacher? What if we narrowed down our editing task to a few items? We'd be able to edit more often and more quickly and to make editing in context more a part of the everyday fabric of writer's workshop. In short, "express-lane edits" get my students rereading their work and thinking about how to edit their writing in ways that clarify their ideas. It is also my version of "Clean up on aisle 3!" It helps us focus on that editor's checklist, moving the principles into the writer's notebook. I can post anything on my classroom walls, but if I don't use it, my students won't, and they won't internalize the concepts.

Each student needs a piece of first-draft writing to begin—not a final copy or a completed essay, but a messy beginning like a writer's notebook entry or a freewrite. I use freewrites to get my students writing fluently; I use express-lane edits to get my students editing fluently.

First, as with most things, I model the process. I want them to engage in. While students freewrite, I write an entry on a transparency. After the freewrite, I say, "I know many of you go to the store a lot. When you're in a hurry, which line do you go to?"

"The express lane."

"It's quick. You're in, you're out," I add. I explain that, like the routine they are used to at the store, I want them to become equally familiar with using express-lane edit as a way to reread their writing, a way to "check out" important items in their work.

"For example, we've been talking about apostrophes—when to insert and when to delete them. I want to show you a quick way to deal with this editing item. I call it the express-lane edit."

I turn the overhead on, revealing my freewrite (see Figure 3.10). "Let's take the freewrite we did on neighbors," I say. "Now, before I read it, I need to make my shopping list." Beneath my writing, on the left half of the transparency I draw a box.

"We have to decide what's going to go in the box—a sort of shopping list." I write *Items to "Check Out"* at the top of the box (see Figure 3.10).

Neighbor Freewrite—Express-Lane Edit Example

When I was five, I wished our neighbor, Mrs. Harrison, were my mother. I wanted to ride around Nederland in Mrs. Harrison's Ford LTD station wagon. It's sides had wood panels and the station wagon's cargo area in back had a trundle seat that pulled up from the floor and made a bench. I coveted that sunken bench, forest green with its own tiny push button seatbelt.

Mom's car was just a boring Plymouth—no wood panels, no trundle seat, no Mrs. Harrison with her sweet perfume and frosted blonde hair. Just our plain old Plymouth and my plain old Mom who smelled like cigarettes and Jergen's hand lotion. She's never going to be like the other Moms, I remember thinking to myself.

Items to "Check Out"

- Apostrophes
Use apostrophes to show ownership except with pronouns (hers, its) Only use apostrophes with pronouns if you are making a contraction (he's = he is, it's = it is)
- Capitalization

Receipt

I changed *Harrisons* to *Harrison's* by inserting an apostrophe because the *apostrophe s* shows it was *Mrs. Harrison's LTD*.

I changed *it's* to *its* because *it's* = *it is*, and I meant ownership. Don't use apostrophes with pronouns unless you want a contraction!

Figure 3.10 Neighbor Freewrite—Express-Lane Edit Example

Think-Aloud Example

The Writing on the Overhead	What I Say Aloud to Show My Thinking Process
When I was five, I wished our neighbor, Mrs. Harrison, were my mother. I wanted to ride around Nederland in Mrs. Harrisons Ford LTD station wagon. It's sides had wood panels and the station wagon's cargo area in back had a trundle seat that pulled up from the floor and made a seat. I coveted that forest green seat, with its own tiny seatbelt. Mom's car was just a boring Plymouth—no wood panels . . .	<p>"Okay, I see that I was trying to show whose Ford it was, and we use apostrophes to show ownership. So I need to change <i>Harrisons</i> to <i>Harrison's</i>, adding an apostrophe. Now I need to write that in my receipt box."</p> <p>"I see another apostrophe on <i>it's</i>. I know people always make mistakes with <i>it's</i> so I need to really think about this. An apostrophe shows ownership, but wait. (I walk over to my wall chart on apostrophes.) That's right, they can show contractions, too. And <i>it's</i> means <i>it is</i>. I don't mean that here. I am not saying 'It is sides.' (I point to the poster.) That's right. Never use apostrophes with possessive pronouns. Apostrophes with pronouns mean contractions, never possession. I need to write this change in my receipt box."</p> <p>[I also think aloud about the other apostrophes as well, letting students tell me why they are correct or incorrect.]</p>

Figure 3.11 Think-Aloud Example

"Since we just added apostrophes to our editor's checklist, let's 'check out' our freewrites for apostrophes. Should we insert or delete any?" I write *apostrophes* in my box. Students copy the box, title, and word *apostrophes* beneath their freewrites in their writer's notebooks. This is the perfect time for a quick review; I have students copy a few details about apostrophes that we have been discussing (see Figure 3.10). Next, we draw another box to the right of the *Items to "Check Out"* box. "The box on the right is titled *Receipts*. In this box, you show me your changes."

"Now we're ready to do the express-lane edit. Before you try, I will show you how to do it using my writing." I read over the text, making my invisible thinking process visible by thinking aloud—modeling my problem-solving process. Figure 3.11 shows some "think-aloud" comments I make while modeling.

As I make changes, I add each change to my "Receipts" box. I model using the language our state test uses, including *insert* and *delete*. Then I have students do the express-lane edit on their own writing. If they find nothing to change, they read it a second time. If students still find no mistakes, they read the writing backwards, word by word, like some journalists do. If they find nothing at all to correct, they write *I found no errors after reading the above writing three times*, followed by their signature. This way everyone always has a receipt.

As an extension, I may cue students to use a specific convention or grammatical construction before they begin their freewrite. Then whatever they were cued to use will be our focus in the express-lane edit.

While the students reread their work for the express-lane edit, I like to play music. A perfect piece for this is “The Typewriter” by Leonard Slatkin, which is easily and inexpensively available on the iTunes Web site. Music does much to change the affect of these mechanics-rich experiences.

If students are only rereading their work, we are making a step in the right direction. What’s really funny is that kids, when limited to what they should edit, for some reason love to edit for something you didn’t list. “Sir, I spelled a word wrong. Can I fix that?” I respond, as if I am doing them a favor, “Well, I guess.” Again, if the only benefit they get from this is rereading, then that’s a start. And, if I am calling their attention to an important concept in a real context, that’s even better. If they actually integrate an apostrophe consciousness into their rereading and rechecking process, Hallelujah! That’s the goal.

The express-lane edit is a class ritual that can be done with or without partners and gives us the ever-important repetition in a meaningful context.

Comma Reinforcers: Cut-and-Paste Mini-Handbooks for the Writer’s Notebook

Because the comma is the most used punctuation mark (Connors and Lunsford 1997), I have found that commas need to be reinforced more than any other punctuation mark. I developed comma mini-handbooks called “comma reinforcers” that can be pasted into the writer’s notebooks one pattern at a time. In the Appendix, there are six comma patterns with the support of student-friendly definitions and examples from literature. These include comma patterns for participles, absolutes, appositives, adjectives out of order, subordinating conjunctions (AAAWWUBBIS), and prepositional phrases. (See Figure 3.12 for an example of the participle comma reinforcer. It shows one of the comma reinforcers found in the Appendix. Each pattern can be pasted in the writer’s notebooks for additional reinforcement of commas.)

I like to photocopy all of the comma reinforcers at the beginning of the year. I cut them into individual patterns and paper clip each stack together until I need to use one of them in class to support writers. I then have ready-to-go comma reinforcers. Kids paste them into their notebooks. They work well at the top of each page of collections in the

Figure 3.12 Cut-and-Paste Comma Reinforcers

Use Comma(s)

Participles

Participles and participial phrases are *-ing* verbs and *-ed* verbs that evoke action and movement in our sentences, either to start a phrase or have a series. (Participles can be *-en* verbs, too.)

Wishing it were cooler and wishing she weren’t hungry, Franny Davis stood in line at the school cafeteria door, **fingering the lunch pass in her pocket.** (p. 1)

—Mary Stolz, *The Noonday Friends*

The bus motor idles, **putting out a long tornado of blue smoke.** (p. 6)

—Chuck Palahniuk, *Choke*

Burping, growing, throwing, running—everything is a race. (p. 6)

—Jerry Spinelli, *Loser*

"Gems" section of the writer's notebook, making sure that kids have correct information at their fingertips for easy reference. I like my kids to keep collections of stunning sentences that can fit under each pattern.

In the Appendix, I have also included many other mini-handbook entries that can be cut and pasted into the writer's notebook whenever writers need extra support. Not every student will become fluent with every pattern. But each student will have support, a reference, and a place to play, collect, and experiment with grammar and mechanics. Gluing these tools right into the middle of the writer's notebook means inserting them directly into the context of daily writing.